



Inaugural Speeches

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Wednesday 9 May 2007.

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.01 a.m.] (Inaugural Speech): Good morning, Mr Deputy-Speaker, friends, comrades, mum, my sister Jak, Shell, Arthur, John, David, and my friends in the public gallery. I pay my respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I thank members of the House for their courtesy and indulgence as I take this opportunity to reflect on the path that has brought me here, my values, my background, my indebtedness to my campaign team and what I aim to achieve as member for Wallsend.

My most important task today is to demonstrate my gratitude to my family, friends, Australian Labor Party [ALP] members, my campaign team—Gary Parker, Bill Royan, Helen Sheehy, Gordon Langford and Jack Adams—and my crusty campaign organiser, Mr Eric Line. I am profoundly appreciative of the help given to me by comrade Gary Kennedy, Secretary of Newcastle Trades Hall Council. There is no doubt that without their guidance, hard work, friendship and support I would not be here speaking to you today. Being the focus of a political campaign makes loyal friends and family essential. At times when self-doubt began to rear its ugly head my campaign team pulled me into gear. Our campaign office operated like a well-oiled machine. It was also the cleanest campaign office known to humankind, thanks to Mum's tender ministrations.

My Australian Labor Party branch members were eager to assist in our Wallsend campaign because they had chosen me through rank and file preselection. Our members want to choose their candidates. Local branch members volunteered in the campaign office, sent postal vote applications, answered the telephone, erected corflutes, organised and attended fundraising events, helped with street stalls, and volunteered on booths on election day. This equated to many hours of unpaid work for which I shall remain eternally grateful.

The beauty of New South Wales is its diversity—diversity of people and diversity of land. If I paint a picture of Wallsend it may help you to understand the good people of the area. They are the workers—the battlers—who forged a better life for people like me. Wallsend is a landlocked area to the west of Newcastle. It is rich in coal, and the town grew with its discovery. One hundred years ago most of its citizens toiled in very harsh conditions in the many coalmines. Wallsend's history has been built on the coalface. The people of Wallsend demonstrate the characteristics of our industrial forefathers. They are hardworking and honest and they believe in a sense of fair play. The notion of a fair day's work for a fair day's pay is embodied in our ethos. The local chapters of the mining unions forged better working conditions for our people.

The miners and our citizens helped to build Wallsend hospital, where my big sister, Shell—who is here today—trained as a nurse. Unfortunately the hospital was closed during the Greiner era, although it has since reopened and now offers outpatient services such as child psychiatry, migrant health and after-hours medical access. We now have two major hospitals in the Wallsend electorate. John Hunter Hospital caters to the health needs of the Hunter and New England. The Mater Hospital, which was recently renamed the Calvary Mater Newcastle, leads the way in cancer treatment and is currently undergoing massive extensions to improve its services. Health is the biggest industry in our electorate. Yesterday the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union presented me with a bottle of water. Its label reads, "When you drink this water, think about workers' rights"—so I shall do that as I drink from it.

Like our hospitals, Newcastle university is a big employer. It is situated squarely in the middle of the electorate and has a terrific and growing reputation as a quality educational and research facility. I trained there in the 1980s as a teacher and have since returned to obtain a Bachelor of Arts, with Honours, in history. Its encouragement of international students has added richness, knowledge and cultural diversity to a settlement that was predominantly Anglo-Saxon. I want to thank Gough Whitlam for giving kids with working-class backgrounds, such as mine, the opportunity to be educated. There were no fees to pay in the late 1970s or early 1980s and students were not burdened with the weight of a Higher Education Contribution Scheme [HECS] bill looming over their shoulders throughout their period of study.

I was the first person in my extended family—most of whom reside around the Wallsend area—to complete school, let alone undertake tertiary education. I spent my childhood with my sisters and brother in Housing Commission homes at Windale and Edgeworth until we rented in Wallsend and West Wallsend. Mum and Dad both endured very tough childhoods. Dad grew up with his brother and sister during the Depression. His mother died of an illegal operation when he was two. His older sister was left with their father to care for their younger brother, who had a disease of the spine. Dad was shipped off to live on a farm with an old aunt who worked him mercilessly and did not spare the rod.

Mum's childhood was equally tough. Her family was dysfunctional and consequently she and her sister and brother were placed in orphanages as infants—like Mr Speaker's mum. Mum was lucky that she had her big sister, Jan, with her at Monte Pio—an orphanage in Maitland that was run by the Sisters of Mercy. Its focus was to train girls to be good domestic servants and wives. Mum got pregnant to Dad at 14. They married and began raising a family while Dad was in and out of work, which created some tensions. He was a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. Even though they had little, they brought us kids up to be sharing and giving. They took in my cousin Darryl from Woodlands Boys Home at Wallsend and raised him as a member of our family after his mother—Dad's sister—committed suicide.

Dad was a shop steward in many of his workplaces and believed in the benefits of trade unionism and collectivism. He mostly drove trucks. He believed in working hard, and expected his boss to be fair. He stood up for others when they needed help and talked about giving the underdog a go. I inherited those values. While travelling around the State teaching, I had an executive role in every teachers association of which I was a member. I have always felt more comfortable standing up for others than with self-promotion.

Mum's values have been fundamental in shaping my beliefs. Mum is kind and honest to a fault. Mum said that when one of the little girls at the orphanage received no presents for Christmas her friends wrapped up a shoelace in a piece of paper and presented it to her because they did not want her to miss out. That is what I learnt from the women from Monte Pio orphanage whom I interviewed for my Honours thesis. Like Mum, they were giving and hardworking. All my siblings have this trait. The concept of giving has taught me that my role as member for Wallsend is about public service. I am elected to help the community as best I can.

My first teaching appointment was to Walgett High School in the electorate of the member for Barwon. It is about eight and a half hours directly northwest of Newcastle; it was so far away from my home at Westy—West Wallsend—that I did not want to go. However, my dad reminded me that I had often talked about the beauty of the public education system as the only one where all children were given the opportunity to be educated regardless of wealth, race or creed, and that belief requires action. Dad reminded me also that the kids of Walgett deserved a quality education as much as anybody else.

Living and working at Walgett taught me a lot. My heart bled with the poverty and hardship of a number of families, some living in town and others living on Ginghi Mission and Namoi Reserve. Walgett is so far away from anywhere else. Unemployment in Walgett is among the highest in the State because there is limited commerce in the town. For Walgett teenagers, going to the city to find work takes them hundreds of miles away from their close-knit community and they often return home jobless after fretting for Walgett.

I became good friends with a woman named Loretta Boney, who grew up in a very modest goondhi, or house, on Namoi Reserve. She and I remain good friends. I remember how when I met Loretta on the main street of Walgett she would say, "Sis, slap on the kettle and let's go back to your goondhi and we'll have a cup of tea." I loved it when she would say that. Loretta now resides in Cardiff South, not far from me in Wallsend, and is a qualified teacher. Living in Walgett also taught me how different our coastal climate and lifestyle is from that of the inland—how hot and harsh it is in summer and how isolated you are from cultural activities. I think you do not really appreciate that unless you have lived there.

From there, I went to teach at Kempsey High School in the electorate of the member for Oxley. Kempsey has its own social problems and poverty, and I involved myself with the union and the community there, just as I had in Walgett. During this time the Australian Labor Party was staring down the gun barrel of electoral defeat. I was concerned about the election of a conservative government, and thus was galvanised into action to become more involved with the party and the Kempsey branch. I acknowledge my dear friend Val Melville—who is a long-time secretary of Kempsey branch and after whom Melville High School is named—who encouraged me to be the first female president of the branch. One of my nicest memories is the camaraderie I shared with the Kempsey branch members sitting in Val's lounge room after handing out how-to-vote cards all day in tiger country, drinking tea, eating scones and watching the election broadcast on television. Sadly, our candidates never won.

From Kempsey I returned to my roots and held various teaching positions in disadvantaged schools around the Hunter before being elected to Newcastle City Council in 2002. My emphasis on council has been raising the profile of our western suburbs and the specific issues of the western residents. Since being on council I have been employed as a community support worker with Hunter Brain Injury Respite Options [BIRO]. It provides respite for carers of persons with acquired brain injuries and it helped me to appreciate the difficulties encountered by people living with disabilities and the immense pressure that carers are put under financially, mentally and physically. Furthermore, it helped me to appreciate how tough it is out there for workers in low-paid jobs, struggling to make ends meet because too often these days they are casually employed.

They were some of the concerns that drove me to join the Labor Party almost 20 years ago. I still believe in the fundamental principles of the party and its ideology of seeking full employment, support for members of the workforce by a strong and vibrant trade union movement, adequate funding for public schools, public hospitals, public transport and social services, and the creation of infrastructure that matches our increasing population. People join the party today for the very same reasons as those who joined before them. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

My predecessor, John Mills, was first elected to the electorate of Wallsend in a by-election almost 20 years ago. I acknowledge Mr Mills' efforts. He is a statesman, always diplomatic and a careful thinker, and he constantly had the best interests of the Wallsend electorate in his heart. Dignitas and gravitas are words that describe John. It is a great honour and privilege to be selected to represent the electorate of Wallsend. I will follow the motto of my high school—Westy: Strive to achieve.